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AUTHOR Hamp-Lyons, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

Eight commercially-available listening and note-taking courses are reviewed and a matrix for comparing their characteristics is presented. "Listening and Note-Taking" (Virginia Yates) was written for college-bound high school students and college students who need to improve listening and note-taking skills, while the "Sack-Yourman Study Skills Program" (Allan Sack, Jack Yourman) was designed for underachieving high school seniors and college freshmen. "ALA Lectures for Listening Comprehension" (William S. Annand) consists of a small booklet and seven taped mini-lectures that simulate a university classroom and that are designed to help students with the "Talks and Conversations" section of the "Test of English as a Foreign Language." "Collins' Listening Comprehension and Note-Taking Course" (K. James, R. R. Jordan, A. J. Matthews) prepares foreign college-bound students to follow lectures and to write adequate notes on lectures in English, while "Listening Focus" (Ellen Kisslinger, Michael Rost) was designed to help students achieve a more advanced stage of listening for lectures, broadcasts, and discussions. The British publication "Take Note" (Michael Berman), consists of 24 taped short passages in a variety of accents and a slim book of transcripts and model notes for each passage. "Listening Contours" (Michael Rost, Athenee Francais) consists of a student book, transcript, sample notes, and answer key. Lastly, "Better Listening Skills" (Jean Sims, Patricia Wilcox Peterson) is an intermediate listening course containing five lectures. (SW)

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SURVEY REVIEW OF MATERIALS FOR TEACHING ADVANCED LISTENING AND NOTE-TAKING

Elizabeth Hamp-Lyons
WESL Institute, Western Illinois University

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Abstract

Eight commercially available listening and note-taking courses are reviewed and then compared on a matrix. A discussion of some of the factors to be sought in the 'ideal listening and note-taking course' ensues.

1. Listening and Note-Taking

Listening and Note-Taking was not written for foreign students, but for college-bound high school students and college students who need to improve their listening and note-taking skills. For us, this is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because most of our university-bound foreign students respond well to material which they perceive as 'the real thing', but it is also a weakness because it contains many cultural assumptions which our students have trouble with.

The introductory chapter in the textbook is very useful for setting the students thinking about the whole process of listening, the structure of lectures, and about how to use the structure of lectures to take their notes. Sadly, the first recording the students hear is an extremely long lecture on '10 Bad Listening Habits', which is probably as bad a lecture as one could hope not to hear: it ends with a Christian homily which many, not all of them foreigners, would find cloying if not offensive.

Listening and Note-Taking does a good job of teaching some of the skills involved in taking notes on lectures: it teaches students to listen for 'cues' to main ideas, examples, details, and digressions. It provides plenty of reinforcement so that students do succeed in learning these skills. It also teaches them to recognize whether a lecture is organized inductively or deductively, and to recognize the parts which most lectures are divided into (introduction; main body; summary; review). It teaches these skills through very short listening samples taken from a wide range of academic topics, each sample being unrelated to any previous sample. The problem with this, for our students, is that they often have no background knowledge or prior experience of the topics, and they come to each one absolutely 'cold', which makes their listening task many times more difficult. Often, providing the students with enough background knowledge so that they can listen meaningfully takes much longer than the listening activity itself. The course would be much more suitable for use with non-native learners if the listening samples were related to each other, and on a generally accessible topic.

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The book teaches the formal outline structure as its standard note-taking format. A formal outline looks like this:

From John R. Boyd and John F. Haskell, eds., "Selected Papers from the Tenth Illinois TESOL/BE Annual Convention (Chicago, IL, Feb 26-27, 1982).

Title

I.
II.
A.
1.
2.
3.
B.
1.
a)
b)
2.
C.
(etc.) III.

This is the format which we (at WESL Institute) teach to our students, because it can be used to as many levels of generalization as would ever be necessary. A weakness of this book, and of all the other books reviewed here, is that it only teaches one method of note-taking. However, Listening and Note-Taking does a very thorough job of teaching formal outline structure, providing about 40 opportunities for practice.

The course takes a large and virtually unannounced jump to a higher level of difficulty in the middle of Section IV Part I. The students have been working on identifying the part of a lecture they are listening to, and deciding whether brief or detailed notes are appropriate: the samples have been quite short and the activities fairly easy. Suddenly, they find themselves in the middle of a lecture on 'three levels of thinking'. This is quite long, comes at them cold, since the introduction has been omitted, is a very unfamiliar topic to most of them, and is conceptually quite difficult. From this point on the students are on their own: there are only seven more lecture samples, all long and on topics which are obscure to most of our students: the Interregnum; Piaget's Theories of Mental Development, etc.

The course does have a lot of strengths, and we would still be using it for at least its introductory sections, if it were not that both textbook and tape have a number of omissions and errors, some of which are quite serious, particularly the omissions in the model notes which are given for each sample. If the publishers decide to go for a third edition, revising the later parts of the course and eliminating all the problems in the manuscript and tapes. Listening and Note-Taking would certainly be worth serious consideration.

2. The Sack-Yourman Study Skills Program

This course was designed for "under-achieving" high school seniors and college freshmen, and not for ESL students. The course begins by teaching a method of taking notes from books, and then applies a version of this method to fifteen taped lectures

described as "as near to a college lecture as can be designed without carrying the students bodily into a lecture hall". The lectures are of realistic lengths and fully developed; the delivery is slow but some natural features, such as hesitations, are retained.

The first taped lecture is on taking notes on lectures, and the students' first attempt at a set of lecture notes is on how to take lecture notes! The note-taking system Sack and Yourman teach is to take raw notes, review them soon after, and organize them. The organizational format they teach is in two steps: in the raw notes, 'Subject Matters' (ie. topic headings) are put on the left side of the page, while generalizations and details are listed on the right; in the reorganized notes, "G's" (generalizations) are put on the left with the subject matters, but indented to the right, while details ("D's") are listed on the right. This system gives three levels of generalization, which is a compromise between the formal outline structure taught in Listening and Note-Taking, and the 'shopping list' approach, which is where we usually start our students. Even if one wants to teach a method of note-taking other than the Sack-Yourman method, the lectures themselves are good to have, as the set consists of some 410 minutes of fairly authentic lecture presentation which can be used to practice whatever note-taking techniques you are teaching. The Sack-Yourman 'package' includes a student note book, a test booklet, a model notes booklet, and a teacher's manual. It seems unnecessary for the students to have either the note book or the test booklet, and sets of model notes could be given out and then returned, thus saving some expense, but the course would make little sense without the teacher's manual.

3. ALA Lectures for Listening Comprehension

This course consists of a very slim booklet and seven taped mini-lectures. It is designed to "simulate a university classroom" and to make the Talks and Conversations part of the TOEFL test easier for the students. The lectures have deliberately been recorded at a slow pace and with clear pronunciation. The introduction refers to the lectures as "practice tests", which indeed they are. There are no activities based on the lectures or the lecture notes the students were required to take, except for 12-15 multiple-choice questions which the students can answer by referring to their notes. The answers to the multiple-choice questions are in the back of the booklet. There is no contents page in the booklet, and the lectures have titles only on the tape. The choice of the seven lecture topics seems rather odd: Ifaluk Indians; Pilaga Indians; the 1929 Depression (2 lectures); the invention of ether; life of Darwin; life of Daniel Boone.

Within the material there is no attempt made to teach either listening skills or note-taking skills, although the introduction does contain 16 suggestions for success in "understanding these lectures and answering the questions correctly". Suggestion number 14 says:

> Try to develop your skills as you practice. If you are bewildered by the first lecture and cannot answer the questions, think of new strategies for the next lecture...

Close examination of the suggestions in the introduction reveals that the course functions solely as a set of listening comprehension tests, the nearest equivalent to which would indeed be TOEFL. Beyond the need to pass TOEFL, one cannot see that the material serves any function at all, since there is no real expectation that learning will take place as a result of teaching. This is a series of decontextualized listening tests, and if we use it, we use it as such - for pre- and post-testing of our students on material distinct from our teaching material.

4. Collins' Listening Comprehension and Note-Taking Course

The aim of this course is to prepare foreign university-bound students to follow lectures and to write adequate notes on lectures in English. The course also aims, interestingly, to stimulate the students' interest in language learning and the study skills necessary for success at tertiary level. It does this by using these as the topics of all the recorded lectures, which brings a sense of realism into the course through continuity and relevance. It also makes the tasks more accessible to the students, since they can bring both personal experience and predictions about the topic into action in their own behalf.

The course is a British publication, and there would be problems in using it within the American setting: there is, however, a posibility that an American version will be produced.

A detailed rationale for the course design is given, and there are detailed teachers' notes. Note-taking is not broken down into skills to be learned, but there is a 'How To Take Notes' section in the front of the book which is quite explicit. The students are helped by a three-stage approach to each lecture:

> Stage 1: introduction to the lecture: a brief taped summary. This can be used for dictation, or as introductory discussion input;
>
> Stage 2: an intermediary recorded version of the lecture with comprehension activities;
>
> Stage 3: guided note-taking on the full version of the recorded lecture.

In Stage 3 the students complete a partial set of notes for each lecture: the format used in the course seems less clearly organized than the formal outline structure, and places perhaps more emphasis on the use of abbreviations than many of our students can safely handle. I would personally prefer to see the emphasis laid on ensuring that students can at least identify the main points in a

lecture and organize them on paper. I would also like to see much less guidance in the notes for the later Units, although of course a teacher can use the material as s/he sees fit.

Overall, however, the conceptualization and design of this course are very sound, and I would see considerable potential for an American version.

5. Listening Focus

Listening Focus was designed to "help students enter a more advanced stage" of listening, ie. understanding lectures, broadcasts and discussions. There is a complete text available for teachers, and the course is well-presented and well-organized, with good use of visuals to support the auditory input.

This is not a note-taking course: rather, it is a pre-note-taking course. Outline structure, of any kind, is neither taught nor expected of the students. After listening to each talk, the students have to answer some 'focus questions'. These are generally well chosen to teach students to listen for the main ideas in the talk. Some listening anticipation activities would have been useful, to prepare the students for the topic they will hear. After the focus questions there is a 'detail check quiz', which, unless the students have taken some kind of notes, would be a memory rather than a listening activity. The recordings themselves are very short, delivered at a slow pace, in simplified language with many pauses. There are no repetitions, hesitations or digressions, and consequently it sounds like an oral reading of a high school textbook. As with almost all tne recorded material reviewed in this survey, the natural redundance of speech style is lacking, a fact which always surprises me, because it makes the listening task considerably more difficult than it would be in most real lecture or other aural/oral situations.

We find Listening Focus useful for remedial work for our weak students, as it is at an easier level than that aimed at in our main course, and also it is presented very clearly and accurately, with no errors that we have found, so that students can work independently in the listening laboratory under the supervision of a tutor.

6. Take Note

Take Note is a British publication, which consists of 24 taped short passages in a variety of accents, predominantly British B.B.C., and a slim book, which contains a one-page 'note to the teacher', transcripts of the tape, and model notes for each passage. The publisher's blurb on the back of the book states that the passages "are also suitable for dictation, oral discussion and written summaries". I am always suspicious of the 'also suitable for...' sales pitch, and in this case with,

I believe, good reason. These are recorded readings, resembling lecture delivery in no way: no instruction in note-taking techniques is given. The specimen notes in the back of the book are in sentence form, hardly practical for lecture note-taking, one would think, and are undifferentiated, only numbered 1) 2) 3) etc. Although the tape is not necessary, making it possible for the passages to be read in whatever accent one chooses, Take Note seems to serve no useful function relative to note-taking whatever.

7. Listening Contours

The first edition of Listening Contours left a great deal to be desired: happily the second edition is more than a revision - it is a completely restructured text which is infinitely superior to its predecessor.

The second edition consists of a student book which contains only student activities, while the tapescript, sample notes and answer key have now been separated into a teacher's book. In the first edition the sample notes were often poorly constructed and non-parallel, breaking the very rules we were laboring to teach our students. The sample notes for the second edition have been extensively rewritten and are much better: some of the talks have been rerecorded in a slightly different form to make the construction of clear notes easier. Some of the talks from the first edition have been completely replaced.

Listening Contours still doesn't teach any skills for students to apply when listening and taking notes, but the organization of the units does provide them with useful support. It should be noted that the new Listening Contours is a little easier than the first edition, and this course cannot be considered advanced. In fact, we find it useful for the level before our college preparation course, to teach the basic formal outline structure and to fill the gap between the kinds of listening found with integrated courses and the kinds of listening we need to expose them to in preparation for listening to real university lectures.

Listening Contours comes from the same publishing house as Listening Focus, and shares with it superior production and sophisticated appearance. Lingual House seem to have decided to specialize in producing high quality listening materials: one may hope that they will eventually add to their list a truly advanced listening and note-taking course of similarly superior quality.

8. Better Listening Skills

This is an intermediate listening course, which, although the recordings are described as lectures, and although it is designed for use in a study skills course, does not claim to teach note-taking. There are five lectures, varying from 5 to 15 minutes in length: they are delivered in the oral reading style which has been noted in the reviews of almost all the other

courses here, at a slow pace and without any natural speech features. The authors claim that the course makes it "possible for students to begin this kind of lecture listening very early in their program of English study". Of course their definition of 'very early' may not be the same as mine, but I would not see the course as suitable for use before the 6th level of our 7-level program.

Each unit is structured so that the students hear each lecture three times: the first time they hear it, they are asked to complete an outline. The outline form is briefly explained in the book, and the teacher's book suggests that one class period be spent discussing outline form. Since comprehension of the organization of information into different levels of generality, the skill required for understanding an outline (let alone making one), is at a very difficult conceptual level, it seems unlikely that one lesson would be enough to teach it satisfactorily. Also, once the concept has been taught and grasped, it seems a pity that it is not utilized more extensively. In this course, completion of an outline is the first stage towards comprehension: the other exercises in each unit are true/false or multiple choice. The teacher's book suggests:

> (Lesson 7) Third Listening: Students take notes while they listen. Check and discuss.

At this stage (third listening) it would seem more appropriate to ask the students to complete a much less guided outline, or to provide them only with the format to complete. As no note-taking strategies have been taught, it seems unreasonable to ask them to make notes without guidance at all. If they are able to do it, presumably it is because they have remembered some of the content from all the work that has gone before, and have remembered the outline organization from the earlier activity. The problem with this is that the students don't seem to have been taught anything which they can generalize as a strategy for future actual note-taking situations, yet because they experience some degree of success with this assignment, they may think they have.

The course does have many good features, on the other hand. The use of a 'thesis statement' to focus attention on the topic of the lecture, and to give the students an overview of the ideas which will be presented within the lecture, is very sound. The listening strategies which are suggested prior to the first listening are also a good idea: unfortunately, the book talks about strategies without ever teaching them, or allowing practice in strictly focussed 'bits' or extracts from the lecture. The teacher's book is more than an answer key: it provides lesson plans for every lesson, and from these it is clear that the authors expect the classroom teacher to be doing many of the things which I have criticized the book for not doing; for example, I have said that the book suggests strategies which the students should use when listening to a particular lecture, without teaching or practicing these. However, in the Teacher's Book under 'Preparation for Listening' (prior to the first listening) we find this for the first three lectures:

> Have students silently read over the Incomplete Outline. Point out the listening cues and organizational strategies. Point out what kind of information to expect in each blank.

The listening cues and organizational strategies which should be pointed out are not, however, given in either the student or the teacher's book.

It seems that Better Listening Skills was prepared by two very professional and dedicated classroom teachers, who felt that they knew clearly in their own minds what a good preparation for academic listening should entail. In the preparation of their ideas and classroom practices for publication, however, those features which would have made the course the most valuable, ie. the actual teaching activities, somehow got left out. I think that Better Listening Skills has a lot of potential, and I would like to see the authors produce a greatly expanded teacher's book to help those teachers whose experience may not match their own.

The "perfect" listening and note-taking course

A glance at the matrix (Figure 1) will show you that I have not, as yet, found the perfect listening and note-taking course. What is the perfect listening and note-taking course? Obviously people's answers to that question will differ: for me the answer is fairly simple: a perfect score on all the criteria in the matrix would indicate the perfect course. I would, however, like to expand on some of the areas where I think most listening and note-taking courses fall down, and suggest how some improvements could be made.

How many of us, when taking notes in lectures, use a formal outline structure? How many of those who make the attempt can look at their notes at the end of the lecture and see that they do in fact have a perfect formal outline, all levels of generalization correctly parallel and complete? Not even one odd point jotted in the margin because they weren't sure which generalization it belonged with, yet felt it was important? My hypothesis is, not many. If so many native speakers with graduate and/or undergraduate degrees in English can't do it - why expect it of our foreign students? In my opinion, the advice given in Listening and Note-Taking about immediate recitation of notes is sound. I also feel the approach of the Sack-Yourman Study Skills Program, in which the students first take 'raw notes' and then immediately organize them, is very realistic and realisable. Either the 'shopping list' or the 'T-formation' would be suitable for raw notes, and when the notes are recited (ie. reread, expanded, digressions deleted, and organized) the formal outline structure could be used: of course this immediate revision requires a mental reconstruction of the lecture, and acts as a memory aid, to make future quizzes and tests easier.

A good lecture, like a good composition, has a structure. I think ESL listening and note-taking courses could be doing much more to help students learn the general structure they can expect in a

lecture. Some listening and note-taking courses do provide pre-listening activities: but a good lecturer provides this in his/her lecture, with an introduction. Similarly, a good lecturer provides a post-listening activity in the form of a conclusion, summary or review. I would expect the perfect listening and note-taking course to teach and provide practice in these helpful features of real lectures - preferably using real lectures. The main body of a lecture usually has a structure (if it hasn't, then the 'shopping list' might be a fair representation of it) which we can teach our students to recognize. The great majority of lectures are organized deductively; that is, from general to specific. The lecturer will open with a statement such as:

> "There are three reasons why ..."
> "The frog develops through three stages ..."
> "Generators can be grouped according to ..."
> "There are a number of behavior patterns associated with paranoia ..."

and will move on to discuss these reasons, stages, groupings, patterns, etc. in some sort of logical order. For the student to be able to follow the lecturer through her/his development of each point to its specific detail and into the next major sub-division, recognizing when the rhetorical shift is made from sub-topic A to the introduction of the general statement of sub-topic B, his general listening ability must be fairly good, but he must also be aware of the organizational conventions of lectures. I think we can do much more than most listening and note-taking courses do to teach these organizational conventions, and some techniques for recognizing when structural shifts are made. I have high hopes of Abelle Mason's Understanding American Lectures, due out at any time, in this area, as this course includes discussions of the roles of lectures in different countries and in different courses, and also discusses different types of lecture, lecturer styles and how different lecturers get their points across. I am really talking about the need to teach our students the sub-skills involved in following a lecture: recognizing rhetorical shift; recognizing examples; recognizing digressions or other irrelevant material; recognizing rephrasing of the same point. A lot can be done in this regard by introducing the students to sets of verbal cues (and non-verbal ones, such as voice modulation) and giving them practice in deciding "what's going on here?". The crucial skill which they must learn is the ability to distinguish levels of generalization: at the very least, they must be able to distinguish the thesis or main topic, from the supports which validate it, from the examples which illustrate them, ie. three levels of generalization. This can be done by plenty of exposure in open-ended situations (class discussion, working in pairs or groups) moving from very short and simple extracts to increasingly longer and more complex ones. The work they are doing at the same time in their reading and writing courses on the structure of discourse will also have a direct carry-over to their understanding of the structure of formal oral discourse.

My perfect listening and note-taking course would also suggest other forms for notes besides the outline, formal or less formal. I have already mentioned the shopping list, which looks like this:

Grocery

flour
coffee
canned tomato paste

Meat

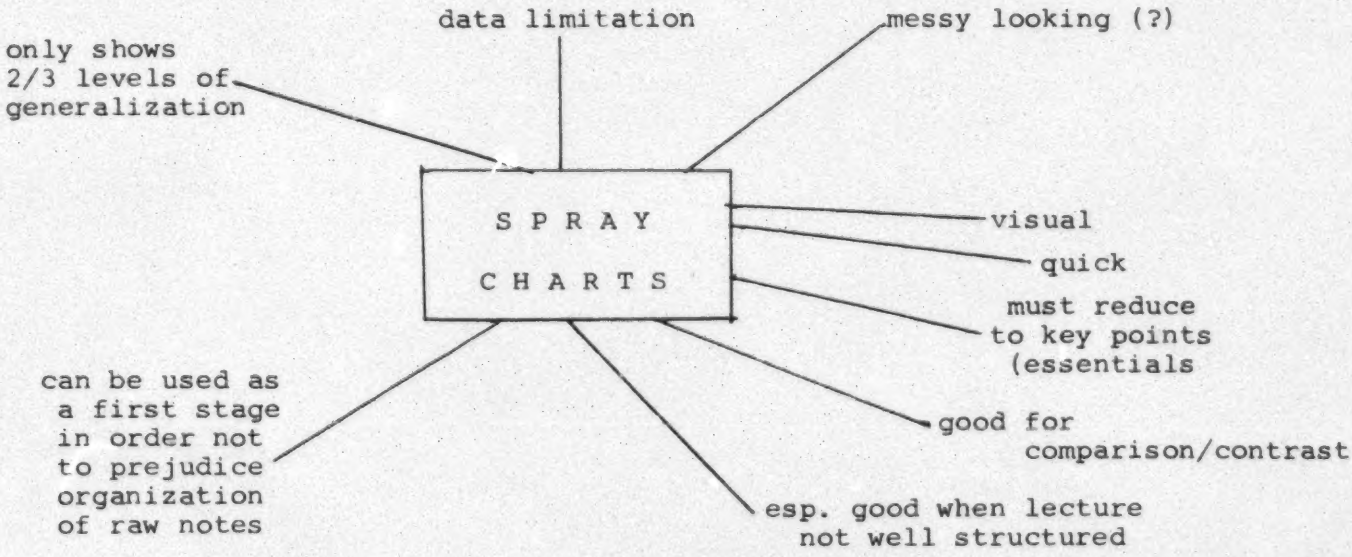
2 lb minced beef
frying chicken
cheese

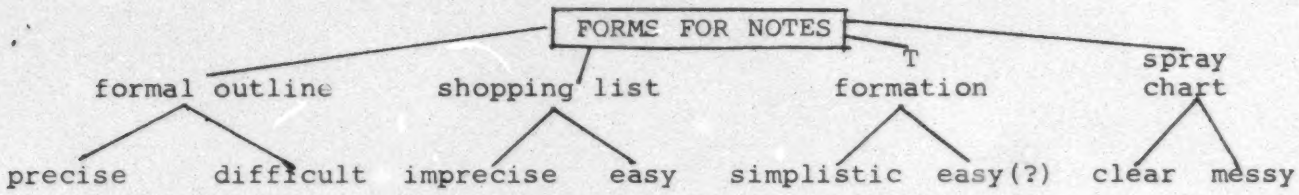
that is, a simple listing of items, with headings picked out when they are easy to recognize, but without a clear overall framework (does cheese belong on the meat list?). I also mentioned the T-formation:

Causes of inflation	high government
	shortage of raw materials
	low taxation (?)
	Depression of 1929

where the concept, or main topic, is clearly separated from the supporting details, which are not further differentiated: this is the type of raw notes suggested by Sack and Yourman. Two of my own favorite forms for notes are:

a) the spray chart. eg.


data limitation
messy looking (?)
only shows 2/3 levels of generalization
S P R A Y
C H A R T S
visual
quick
must reduce to key points (essentials
good for comparison/contrast
esp. good when lecture not well structured
can be used as a first stage in order not to prejudice organization of raw notes



The obvious advantage of introducing students to a variety of note-taking forms is that they will later be able to select an appropriate form for a particular lecture.

I also think there are many advantages to a listening and note-taking course which has a single theme. This is the approach which the Collins course takes, and it also has the advantage of having chosen a topic which is highly relevant to all students taking the course. The danger with a thematic course would be that it might become boring, but I feel that this danger could be avoided by careful selection of material.

An absolute must for a listening and note-taking course, in my opinion, is an increasing approximation of realism as the course progresses. I feel that any such course which purports to prepare students for real university lectures must culminate with five or six real, if short, university lectures, with all the hesitations, false starts, repetitions and digressions they will have to deal with, unaided, in real university classes.

Finally, the perfect listening and note-taking course will need the perfect teacher's book. Too often, a teacher's book contains nothing more than the tapescript and an answer key to objective questions. I would expect a good teacher's manual to contain model notes, suggested answers to open-ended questions, key points expected in response to discussion and other free activities, and suggested lesson plans. It also should contain a statement of the objectives of the course and the rationale for the approach used, as well as an overview of the structure of the course and the items taught in each unit. A teacher's book seems to be especially important for an area such as listening and note-taking, since very often this is the kind of course which is given to a graduate student to teach, since so many people suffer from the mistaken belief that listening is "easy to teach".

Conclusion

A glance at the overall score horizontal column of the matrix will show that the course which comes closest to "perfection" according to my criteria is The Sack-Yourman Study Skills Program. The overall score is arrived at by totaling the scores for nos. 1-8 and 10-19 (total possible 180), adding 1 for every 10 minutes of tape time and subtracting 1 for every $10 cost: score 10 for advanced, 5 for high intermediate and 0 for intermediate: then add the raw figure for the number of lessons suggested for the course (this last figure is highly dubious and only used for simplicity: if you can see the flaw in it, simply subtract the number of lessons from my overall

score for a perhaps more valid result).

Since this is a personal matrix and the scores out of 10 reflect my personal opinions, you might like to try the same, or similar, exercise yourself.

NOTES: (Figure 1)

(1) Yes/No = the absence/presence of a feature; scores 1-10 indicate a negative or a positive response to the quantity and/or quality of a feature present (1 = most negative).

(2) all responses relate only the course's suitability for use in a pre-university/college listening and note-taking course.

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Coming Soon:

Understanding American Lectures: A Text with Lecture Tapes for Advanced Students of ESL by Abelle Mason. 1982. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Figure 1

Matrix Comparing Eight Listening and Note-Taking Courses

CRITERIA	Listening & Note-Taking	Sack-Yourman	ALA Lectures	Collins Listening	Listening Focus	Take Note	Listening Contours	Better Listenin
1. Teacher's book	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
2. Transcript	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3. Answer Key	N/A	N/A	10	10	10	N/A	10	10
4. Model notes	5	9	No	7	N/A	2	8	8
5. Rationale	2	6	1	9	3	1	3	4
6. Suggestions	1	6	2	8	2	1	2	5
7. Student book	7	4	2	8	10	2	10	8
8. Pre/post tests	5	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
9. Tape length	240'	410'	50'	150'	60'	50'	120'	50'
10. Tape production	3	9	4	8	8	7	8	9
11. Tape realism	3	8	2	6	5	3	5	5
12. Relevance	10	9	2	10	5	3	7	7
13. Appropriacy	2	6	3	8	5	4	5	7
14. Teaches Listening Skills	8	1	1	4	4	1	4	4
15. Teaches note-taking Structures	9	9	1	7	1	3	7	3
16. Integrates 14 w/15	7	3	1	5	1	1	5	4
17. Completeness	8	6	1	6	3	1	5	5
18. Text prod.	3	9	9	9	10	5	10	9
19. Pedagogic accuracy	9	9	1	9	9	2	9	9
20. Est. # of lessons	30	20	7	30	24	20	24	40
21. Est. Level	Adv	Adv	High Intm	Adv	Intm	High Intm	High Intm	Intm
22. Price of full set of tapes	$131	$99	$20	$100	$29.50	£15	$29.50	$20
Overall Score	163	185	62	169	129	83	151	161